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SAILORS' CHANTIES.

IN attempting to account for poetic origins, it was formerly the custom to refer them to the individual; of late the tendency has been to refer them to the crowd. The individual poet, whether working in the solitude of his closet, or, as minstrel, in the glare of the hall, has been perceived to be too sophisticated a person, too conscious an artist, to stand at the beginning of poetic developments. For the most part, primitive poetry is far too impersonal, far too haphazard and inconsequential, to admit of the individualistic hypothesis; whereas if the communal theory be allowed, not only are these very phenomena explicable, but also are they perceived to be the logical consequence of precisely such a method. Whether or not the communal theory should be called upon to account for everything in primitive poetry is a far-reaching question, and one which does not fall within the scope of this paper. All that this paper will attempt to do will be to follow through certain actual instances of communal composition which happened to come under the observation of the author; and although the ballads cited may be familiar to many, still it is hoped that the discussion of them from this point of view may prove of interest.

Some years ago it was the fortune of the author to spend part of his time cruising on merchant sailing-ships, when he became attracted by the chanties¹ — those songs sailors are accustomed to sing when hauling at the sails, walking the capstan round, working the windlass, or toiling at the pumps. A few of these chanties he collected; but the collection was soon forgotten, and came no more to his mind until a short time ago, when he happened to be concerned with ballad problems. Then it was that the chantie-singing to which he had so often listened appeared in a new light, for it became at once apparent that here was a contemporary, dramatic, and complete exemplification of the communal process.

The indispensable conditions for the communal origination of poetry are, according to the hypothesis, two: first, a folk sufficiently homogeneous to possess a fund of common knowledge; and, secondly, at least one individual who, when such a people is gathered together, can lead in what may be termed the composital-recitation of the deeds of the tribe. In a word, it is necessary to have only a crowd and a "fore-singer." Now both of these are found on board the sailing-ship at sea. Excepting the officers, we have a band of men engaged in a common occupation, — that of working the ship, — so that the group is ideally homogeneous; and from amongst this group a chantie-

¹ Sailors pronounce this, generally, as if it were "shanty."

leader quickly succeeds in asserting himself,—that is to say, our “fore-singer” is also at hand. As to the impulse which compels such a group of men to communal singing, and to communal composing, the question is one which may be postponed for the moment; for the present, it will be sufficient to accept the fact of the impulse, and to confine the examination to the songs themselves.

Since this is an age of books,—the poetry with which we have to deal being primitive logically, not temporally,—obviously it would be possible for sailors to use “book” songs. And to a certain extent this is done. There exist “Sailors’ Song Books” containing such specimens of the “poetry of art” as it would seem ought to appeal to the sailor-mind, and these songs are occasionally used as chanties. But such songs do not displace those which the sailors communally compose, although their influence upon the latter is clearly discernible. Indeed, whole lines, sometimes whole stanzas, of well-known ballads and songs will be found imbedded in chanties otherwise unmistakably of communal origin. The difference between songs composed *for* sailors and those composed *by* sailors becomes quickly apparent, however, as soon as direct comparison is made between the two. As a specimen of what might be termed the “chantie of art,” a stanza from the “Anchor Song” in Kipling’s “The Seven Seas” will serve the purpose admirably:—

(SOLO.) Heh! Walk her round. Heave, ah heave her short again!
 Over, snatch her over, there, and hold her on the pawl.
 Loose all sail, and brace your yards aback and full—
 Ready jib to pay her off and heave short all!

(CHORUS.) Well, ah fare you well; we can stay no more with you, my love—
 Down, set down your liquor and your girl from off your knee;
 For the wind has come to say:
 You must take me while you may,
 If you’d go to Mother Carey,
 (Walk her down to Mother Carey!)
 Oh, we’re bound to Mother Carey where she feeds her chicks
 at sea!¹

This is breezy, certainly, and with a fine, compelling swing; in short, it seems to be in one of Kipling’s happiest moods. But as a song to get the anchor up by, it is too complex, too ornate, in a word, too artificial. Hardly a word of this stanza could be changed, certainly no line could be changed, and not materially alter the whole. In brief, this song was *made*, it did not *grow*. Let this be contrasted, now, with a genuine capstan chantie:²—

¹ Rudyard Kipling, *The Seven Seas*, N. Y., 1896, p. 87.

² The capstan is used in bringing the anchor to the “cat-head,” the beam to
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(SOLO.) Our anchor we 'll weigh, and our sails we will set.

(CHORUS.) Good-bye, fare ye well,

Good-bye, fare ye well,

(SOLO.) The friends we are leaving we leave with regret,

(CHORUS.) Hurrah, my boys, we 're homeward bound !

We 're homeward bound, oh joyful sound !

Good-bye, etc.,

Good bye, etc.,

Come rally the capstan and run quick around,

Hurrah, etc.

We 're homeward bound, we 'd have you know,

Good-bye, etc.,

Good-bye, etc.,

And over the water to England must go,

Hurrah, etc.

Heave with a will, and heave long and strong,

Good-bye, etc.,

Good-bye, etc.,

Sing a good chorus, for 't is a good song,

Hurrah, etc.

"We 're homeward bound," you 've heard us say,

Good-bye, etc.,

Good-bye, etc.,

Hook on the cat-fall, there, and run her away,

Hurrah, etc.

Clearly, this chantie grew. The reader realizes that it is only by chance the words are what they are, and where they are ; as one reads, there is entirely lacking any feeling of inevitableness as to words or lines. That each line has been improvised to suit the exigencies of the moment is evident ; the only necessitation one feels is in regard to the rhyme-word of the second solo-line. Conscious structure there is none, or almost none. Line could interchange with line, stanza with stanza, the whole could be longer or shorter, and the chantie would be no worse, and no better, structurally, than it is now. The whole is haphazard, inconsequential, and, excepting the refrain, absolutely spontaneous.

On board ship, "das Volk dichtet," to use Grimm's phrase. But this does not mean that all shout at once ; it simply means that any

which the anchor is lashed while the ship is at sea. The anchor is raised from the bottom by the windlass, situated below the fo'csle-deck, but worked from the latter by means of handles which travel up and down.

chantie for the moment under consideration—if it be a genuine sailor's chantie—is the production of considerably more than one Dichter, and that, although we may come across other versions of the same song, we shall never meet with two sailors who sing it exactly alike,—except as to the refrain. Indeed, we shall not find the same sailor singing the same words twice,—except, again, as to the refrain. A word will be said later as to these refrains, which pass from ship to ship, from generation of seamen to generation. As a further illustration of improvisation and refrain this masthead-ing chantie is typical :—

As I was going to Rig-a-ma-row,
(CHORUS.) I say so, and I hope so,
I saw an old man go riding by,
(CHORUS.) Poor — old — man.

Said I, old man your horse will die,
I say so, etc.
Said I, old man your horse will die,
Poor — old — man.

And if he dies I 'll tan his skin, etc.

And from his hide I 'll make my shoes, etc.

The extent to which the anatomy of the horse might be utilized in such a ballad as this is obviously infinite, and would in any instance be determined solely by the length of time required to masthead the sail. Let us assume that to be some smaller piece of top-canvas, and pass to the conclusion of the chantie, which is apt to go something like this :—

(SOLO.) I thought I heard the first-mate say
He 'd give us grog three times to-day.
(ALL.) Belay!

Among other popular mastheading chanties are the following :—

I.

Whiskey is the life of man,
Whiskey for Johnnie !
Whiskey from an old tin can,
Whiskey for Johnnie.

Whiskey here and whiskey there,
Whiskey, etc.
Whiskey almost everywhere,
Whiskey, etc.

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Whiskey made the skipper say,
 Whiskey, etc.
 Another pull and then belay,
 Whiskey, etc.

II.

Oh, up aloft the yard must go !
 So handy, my boys, so handy.
 Oh, up aloft from down below,
 So handy, my boys, so handy.

Oh, sing and haul, and haul and sing,
 So handy, etc.
 Right up aloft the yard we 'll bring,
 So handy, etc.

When it is set the mate he 'll say,
 Handy, etc.
 'Vast hoisting, lads, so we 'll belay,
 So handy, etc.

III.

I thought I heard the skipper say,
 Leave her, Johnnie, leave her.
 You have sailed for many a day,
 It's time for us to leave her.

The work was hard, the voyage was long,
 Leave her, etc.
 The winds were high, the winds were strong,
 It's time, etc.

The food was bad, the pay was low,
 Leave her, etc.
 But now ashore at last we 'll go,
 It's time, etc.

The sails are furled, our work is done,
 Leave her, etc.
 And now on shore we 'll have some fun,
 It's time, etc.

Here is one which may, perhaps, be assumed to have originated as a man-o'-war chantie, "Boney" being, of course, Napoleon. The chantie is, like the Dead Horse chantie, of the very simplest type, there being no attempt to improvise more than one line in the stanza :—

Boney was a warrior,
Oh, ay, oh !
Boney was a warrior,
Oh, ay, oh.

Boney marched to Moscow,
Oh, etc.
Boney, etc.

Boney had to turn again, etc.

Boney went to Waterloo, etc.

Boney was a prisoner, etc.

Boney broke his heart and died, etc.

Of the chanties which have come to the notice of the author, this is one of the few in which historical material is preserved ; as a rule, the matter of the solo-lines is either nautical or ephemeral. On the other hand, there are many chanties, and excellent ones, which preserve the names of once famous ships, or lines of ships. The famous Dreadnought, whose record-run across the Atlantic has never been beaten, figures in many chanties. Here is a stanza from one of these :—

She's a high-sounding Packet,
A Packet of fame,
She comes from New York,
And the Dreadnought 's her name.

Here is one handing down the name of a line of packets :—

In the Blackball Line I served my time,
Hurrah for the Blackball Line !
In the Blackball Line I served my time,
Hurrah for the Blackball Line !

The Blackball ships are good and true,
Hurrah, etc.
They are the ships for me and you,
Hurrah, etc.

For once there was a Blackball ship,
Hurrah, etc.
That fourteen knots an hour could clip,
Hurrah, etc., etc.

Now if we stop to examine the chanties quoted, and compare them with some such primitive ballad as, let us say, the "Hangman's Tree," they will be seen to have many features in common :—

Hangman, hangman, howd yo hand,
O howd it wide and far !
For there I see my feyther coomin,
Riding through the air.

Feyther, feyther, ha yo brot me goold ?
Ha yo paid my fee ?
Or ha yo coom to see me hung,
Beneath tha hangman's tree ?

I ha naw brot yo goold,
I ha naw paid yo fee,
But I ha coom to see yo hung
Beneath the hangman's tree.

Hangman, hangman, howd yo hand,
O howd it wide and far !
For theer I see my meyther coomin,
Riding through the air. . . .

The question asked of the father is now asked of the mother, and the same reply is received. The mother also will see the hanging. Next the sister appears on the scene. The same question is asked of the sister, the same reply is received. Finally, and just in time, she (the victim) perceives her sweetheart hurrying—we trust that he is hurrying—through the air. Then the question is addressed to him :—

Sweetheart, sweetheart, ha yo brot me goold ?
Ha yo paid my fee ?
Or ha yo coom to see me hung
Beneath the hangman's tree ?

To which he replies :—

O I ha brot yo goold,
And I ha paid yo fee,
And I ha coom to take yo from
Beneath the hangman's tree.¹

This ballad has no fixed length : the sister might have been omitted and the sweetheart made to follow directly upon the heels of the mother ; or for the sister, the brother—who does not appear at all—might have been substituted ; or the brother might also have been brought into the narrative, and, in addition to the brother, any

¹ *English and Scottish Popular Ballads*, Sargent and Kittredge, Boston, p. xxv.

number of aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends,—in no case should we have felt that the ballad was either more symmetrical or less symmetrical than it is now. And similarly with the chanties; we might have had enumerated all the separate processes of a rendering-plant for dead horses, or been confronted with three times the number of reasons for Johnnie's leaving the ship, and the chanties would have been neither more nor less complete.

Secondly, as to the improvisation in each. In regard to the "Hangman's Tree," Professor Kittredge, in the "Introduction" to the volume quoted, says: "Suppose now that 'The Hangman's Tree' is a new ballad sung for the first time by the improvising author. The audience are silent for the first two stanzas and until the first line of the third has been finished. After that, they join in the song. So inevitable is the course of the narrative, so conventionally fixed the turn of the phraseology, that they could almost finish the piece by themselves if the author remained silent. At most they would need his prompting for 'meyther,' 'sister,' and 'sweetheart,' . . . The song is ended, the creative act of composition is finished,—and what has become of the author? He is lost in the throng."¹

Allowing for the difference of purpose served by the respective acts of composition, this is the story of chantie-singing, precisely. It is the tendency of the popular ballad, by reason of its constant repetition by a folk who are permanent, to become fairly well knit structurally; the chantie, because the group of men among whom it originates maintains its homogeneity but a short time, is under no such law. Hence, in the latter, we are unlikely to pass beyond the inconsequential stage. Even the most primitive ballad we can bring forward has, by reason of generations of repetition, become a better piece of work, structurally, than we can expect any chantie to be. For this very reason, however, the chantie is especially valuable for the hypothesis. In the chantie, the solo-lines are so simple, involve so much repetition, are so conventional (from the point of view of ship-life, that is to say) and the "motif" in every case so obvious, that we should suspect communal composition, even if we could not be sure of it. The refrain aside, what may be called the body of the chantie is not, any more than the body of the ballad, necessarily composed throughout by one and the same man. Some one other than the one who has first taken upon himself the office of "chantie-man," some one with a louder voice, or a more fertile imagination, who sees a possible development of the narrative, or has a grievance he would like to air, either anticipates the original soloist, or drowns him out. In this way, several individuals will each have taken part

¹ *Ibid.* p. xxvi.

in the composition of the chantie of the moment. And at the close, not one author, but all the authors, will be lost in the crowd.

Another characteristic common both to the popular ballad and to the chantie is that there is no *text*, there are *texts*.¹ As from time to time collections of popular ballads are made, so are collections of chanties made. In preparing this article such a collection has been used whenever the texts the author had collected were not suited to the purpose. But in any such compilation the versions given are no more authentic than would be texts from any other compilation : the versions given are simply those which happened to be familiar to the sailor or sailors whom the collector happened to consult,—other sailors would have furnished him with very different versions. Take this stanza from a chantie which originated in the earlier days of the California trade :—

Good-bye, my love, good-bye,
I cannot tell you why,
I'm off to California
To dig the yellow gold.

On the very same ship from which this was collected, another sailor gave this version :—

Blow, boys, blow,
For California, O !
We're bound for Sacramento
To dig the yellow gold.

But this, in turn, is clearly related to the following chantie :—

Yankee ship came down the river,
Blow, boys, blow !
Her masts did bend, her sides did shiver,
Blow, my jolly boys, blow !

The sails were old, her timbers rotten,
Blow, etc.
His charts the skipper had forgotten,²
Blow, my jolly boys, blow !

Who do you think was skipper of her ?
Blow, etc.
"Old Preaching Sam," the noted scoffer,³
Blow, etc.

¹ Cf. *loc. cit.* p. xvii.

² The sailor is happy when he can get a "grind" on the "skipper."

³ Compare the way in which ballads preserve the names of people otherwise forgotten.

She sailed away for London city,
Blow, etc.
Never got there, what a pity !
Blow, etc.

And if this is not a version of the following, it is, at least, related to it : —

I 'll sing you a song, a good song of the sea,
To my ay, ay, blow the man down ;
I trust that you 'll join in the chorus with me,
Give me some time to blow the man down.

If so many variations of one theme have come down to us, how many more, simply for lack of a recorder, must have perished ? The man who has succeeded in becoming principal "chantie-man" on one ship, is, on his next voyage, beaten out by some rival ; nevertheless, he will often be able to assert himself, — to use the current slang phrase, which expresses the situation exactly, he will succeed occasionally in "butting in." The result would be, if we should report any chantie sung on this latter voyage, that we should have, not the version either would have given had he been the sole "forsinger" of the ship, but we should have a version which would be a patchwork of those two. But, further, this patchwork would be, not merely a combination of their two versions, but of many, for, just as these two have been rival chantie producers on this particular voyage, each will have had his rival on previous voyages. Hence, so much of chantie material as each brings with him to this ship — brings in his memory, of course, not on paper — will be no more his own than the version which we might take down on this voyage would be the sole product of either of our two men. And this would hold true, back and back, as far as one cared to carry it.

Thus the chantie-version of any one moment is the joint product of memory and of improvisation ; the survival of two opposing tendencies, — the tendency towards permanency and the tendency towards change. It is the law of the refrain to be permanent, and to suffer the minimum of change ; it is the law of the body of the chantie to undergo the maximum of change, but at the same time also to exhibit certain fairly permanent features.

From this examination of chanties, then, we are able to arrive at a fairly clear conception of the term "communal composition." A crowd shouting as with one voice is farthest from what is meant, — the "Volk" does not "dichten" as one man. On the contrary, "communal composition" means simply that if a cross-section were to be made at any one moment of the poetical work (saving the name) of any primitive but homogenous people, the result would be

a collection no single specimen of which would be the sole work of any one man. Instead, every piece would be an accretional product, the result of such suggestions as would have been able in the struggle for existence to survive, modified by the improvisations of the latest singer or singers. If chanties are typical of communally composed ballads,—and it would seem that they are,—then every such ballad is, at the moment it is taken down, an accretional survival which has been subjected to contemporary variation.

So much, then, for chanties in general, and their general bearing upon the question of communal composition. Is it possible to narrow the problem further, and to get at the origin of chanties? The question brings us back to the consideration of the impulse to chantie singing, a consideration which was postponed for the moment.

The various tasks performed by sailors in working the ship are essentially rhythmic in their nature, which fact alone would be sufficient to impel many a man to accompany his work by rhythmic vocal utterances. The impulse to such vocal accompaniment may be regarded as the initial, or natural, chantie-impulse. But further than this; several men are likely to be engaged upon the same task, and these men can give a greater degree of unity to their work, can apply their strength to greater advantage, if they "keep time" vocally. This, of course, is obvious, but it is of value to the discussion, for it can be looked upon as the practical impulse, and to these two impulses working together may be attributed the phenomenon of chantie-singing. This is, however, susceptible of yet further elaboration; the various kinds of work performed have their own special types of rhythm, and these furnish a basis for well-differentiated verse-rhythms. The mastheading of a sail is not performed in the same rhythm in which one pumps.

The simplest rhythmic work on board ship is the sheeting-home of sails and the shaping of yards,—that is to say, changing the angle of the yard in respect to the ship. In each case, the work is likely to require the putting forth of considerable strength. To keep time, one man will probably call (or, if one prefers, sing) some such word as "Yo-ho" at each haul on the rope. If the work is a trifle less arduous, he may, instead, cry, "Yo—heave—ho." That is to say, instead of giving successive pulls, at approximately equal intervals, three pulls will be given in more rapid succession, then there will be a longer pause, then three more pulls, and so on, until the task is finished. In this latter, and more complex case, then, there will have been established, in addition to what might be called the "verse-rhythm," something which might fairly be termed "stanza rhythm," or "stanza structure," although the length of the stanza would, obviously, not be determined.

The next more complex chantie structure (if, indeed, the simply "Yo—heave—ho" can be called a chantie at all) is that of the mast-heading chantie. To masthead a sail, especially if it be a large sail, requires considerable time. Moreover, the work is by no means light. The most expeditious way of accomplishing the work is, therefore, to give a succession of pulls, then to take a breathing-spell, then to give another succession of pulls. Again, the hauling can be done to better advantage by keeping time. This time is kept to the refrain of the chantie, and it is during the breathing-space that the chantie-man exercises his solo-gifts. But here, also, the structure of the stanza is largely determined by the rhythm of the work performed. This can be illustrated by referring to any of the mast-heading chanties quoted above; perhaps the Dead Horse chantie will serve as well as another:—

As I was going to Rig-a-ma-row,
I say (pull) so, and I hope (pull) so,
I saw an old man go riding by,
Poor (pull) old (pull) man (pull).

Clearly, the number and relations of the stresses necessitated for the refrain lines have, to a certain degree, determined the rhythmic structure of the solo lines.

When we come to capstan and pumping chanties the rhythm is less determinate, as these two examples will show.

O Polly Brown, I love your daughter,
(CHORUS.) Away my rolling river !
O Polly Brown ! I love your daughter,
(CHORUS.) Ah ! ah ! we 're bound away,
'Cross the wide Missouri.

And this, from a Negro chantie:—

Ol' Joe, bully ol' Joe,
Hi pretty yaller gal !
Kicking up behind, Ol' Joe ;
Ol' Joe 's got some very fine clo's,
Whar he get 'em nobody knows,—
Hi pretty yaller gal !
Kicking up behind, Ol' Joe.

In short, any song not too complex to march by can be used for a capstan chantie, and the conditions imposed upon the windlass chantie are not more rigid; consequently "book songs" are, as stated above, frequently used at this work. A favorite capstan chantie is "Marching through Georgia."

It will not be necessary to cite further examples to support the

thesis which the latter part of this paper has sought to maintain ; that the impulse to chantie-singing is due to the impulse to accompany rhythmically performed work by correspondingly rhythmic vocal expression is sufficiently evident. On the other hand, the author does not wish to extend this thesis to other fields ; that is to say, because he has insisted that, in its communal features, chantie-singing enables us to understand more clearly how poetry could have begun, he does not wish to imply that poetry necessarily began as accompaniment to rhythmic work.¹

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¹ Those who would like to see such a thesis maintained are referred to that very suggestive work, *Arbeit und Rhythmus*, K. Bücher, Leipzig, 1899. Those who are acquainted with that essay will have perceived its influence upon this article. The third, revised and enlarged edition of this work of Dr. Bücher appeared in 1902.